

THE CIRCULAR STAIRCASE

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART
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SYNOPSIS.

Miss Innes, spinster and guardian of Gertrude and Halsey, established summer headquarters at Sunnyside. Amidst numerous difficulties the servants deserted. As Miss Innes looked up for the night she was startled by a dark figure on the veranda. Unseen noise disturbed her during the night. In the morning Miss Innes found a strange link cuff-button in a hamper. Gertrude and Halsey arrived with Jack Bailey. The house was awakened by a revolver shot and Arnold Armstrong was found shot to death in the hall. Miss Innes found Halsey's revolver on the lawn. He and Jack Bailey had disappeared. The link cuff-button mysteriously disappeared. Detective Jamieson arrived. Gertrude revealed she was engaged to Jack Bailey, with whom she talked in the billiard room a few moments before the murder. Jamieson accused Miss Innes of holding back evidence. He imprisoned an intruder in an empty room. The prisoner escaped down a laundry chute. Gertrude was suspected. A negro found the other half of what proved to be Jack Bailey's watch-dog. Halsey reappears and says he and Bailey left in response to a telegram. Gertrude said she had given Bailey an unloaded revolver, fearing to give him a loaded weapon. Charles Bailey of Paul Armstrong's bank, defeated was arrested for embezzlement. Halsey said Armstrong wrecked his own bank and could clear Bailey. Paul Armstrong's death was announced. Halsey's fiancée, Louise Armstrong, was found at the hotel. The lodgekeeper said Louise and Arnold had a long talk the night of the murder. Louise was prostrated. Louise said Halsey, that while she still loved him she was to marry another, and that he would destroy her when he learned the whole story. It developed that Mr. Walker and Louise were to be married. A prisoner was heard in the house. Louise was found at the bottom of the circular staircase.

CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.

"I was not sleeping well," she began, "partly, I think, because I had slept during the afternoon. Liddy brought me some hot milk at ten o'clock and I slept until 12. Then I awakened and I got to thinking about things, and worrying, so I could not go to sleep."

"I was wondering why I had not heard from Arnold since the—since I saw him that night at the lodge. I was afraid he was ill, because—he was to have done something for me, and he had not come back. It must have been three when I heard some one rapping. I sat up and listened, to be quite sure, and the rapping kept up. I was cautious, and I was about to call Liddy. Then suddenly I thought I knew what it was. The east entrance and circular staircase were always used by Arnold when he was out late, and sometimes, when he forgot his key, he would rap and I would go down and let him in. I thought he had come back to see me—I didn't think about the time, for his hours were always erratic. But I was afraid I was too weak to get down the stairs. The knocking kept up, and just as I was about to call Liddy, she ran through the room and out into the hall. I got up then, feeling weak and dizzy, and put on my dressing-gown. If it was Arnold, I knew I must see him."

"It was very dark everywhere, but, of course, I knew my way. I felt along for the stair-rail, and went down as quickly as I could. The knocking had stopped, and I was afraid I was too late. I got to the foot of the staircase and over to the door on to the east veranda. I had never thought of anything but that it was Arnold, until I reached the door. It was unlocked and opened about an inch. Everything was black; it was perfectly dark out side. I felt very queer and shaky. Then I thought perhaps Arnold had used his key; he did—strange things sometimes, and I turned around. Just as I reached the foot of the staircase I thought I heard some one coming. My nerves were going anyhow, there in the dark, and I could scarcely stand. I got up as far as the third or fourth step, then I felt that some one was coming toward me on the staircase. The next instant a hand met mine on the stair-rail. Some one brushed past me, and I screamed. Then I must have fainted."

That was Louise's story. There could be no doubt of its truth, and the thing that made it inexpressibly awful to me was that the poor girl had crept down to answer the summons of a brother who would never need her kindly offices again. Twice, now, without apparent cause, some one had entered the house by means of the east entrance; had apparently gone his way unhindered through the house, and gone out again as he had entered. Had this unknown visitor been there a third time, the night Arnold Armstrong was murdered? Or a fourth, the time Mr. Jamieson had locked some one in the clothes chute?

Sleep was impossible, I think, for any of us. We dispersed finally to bathe and dress, leaving Louise little the worse for her experience. But I determined that before the day was over she must know the true state of affairs. Another decision I made, and I put it into execution immediately after breakfast. I had one of the unused bedrooms in the east wing, back along the small corridor, prepared for occupancy, and from that time on Alex, the gardener, slept there. One man in that barn of a house was an absurdity, with things happening all the time, and I must say that Alex was as unobjectionable as any one could possibly be.

The next morning, also, Halsey and I made an exhaustive examination of the circular staircase, the small entry at its foot, and the cardroom opening from it. There was no evidence of anything unusual the night before, and



"My Home Is in Englewood," the Doctor Began.

had we not ourselves heard the rapping noises, I should have felt that Louise's imagination had run away with her. The outer door was closed and locked, and the staircase curved above us, for all the world like any other staircase.

Halsey, who had never taken seriously my account of the night Liddy and I were there alone, was grave enough now. He examined the paneling of the wainscoting above and below the stairs, evidently looking for a secret door, and suddenly there flashed into my mind the recollection of a scrap of paper that Mr. Jamieson had found among Arnold Armstrong's effects. As nearly as possible I repeated its contents to him, while Halsey took them down in a notebook.

"I wish you had told me this before," he said, as he put the memorandum carefully away. We found nothing at all in the house, and I expected little from any examination of the porch and grounds. But as we opened the outer door something fell into the entry with a clatter. It was a cue from the billiard room.

Halsey picked it up with an exclamation. "That's careless enough," he said. "Some of the servants have been amusing themselves." "I was far from convinced. Not one of the servants would go into that wing at night unless driven by dire necessity. And a billiard cue? As a weapon of either offense or defense it was an absurdity, unless one accepted Liddy's hypothesis of a ghost, and even then, as Halsey pointed out, a billiard-playing ghost would be a very modern evolution of an ancient institution.

That afternoon we, Gertrude, Halsey and I, attended the coroner's inquest in town. Dr. Stewart had been summoned also, it transpiring that in that early Sunday morning, when Gertrude and I had gone to our rooms, he had been called to view the body. We went, the four of us, in the machine, preferring the execrable roads to the matinee train, with half of Casanova staring at us. And on the way we decided to say nothing of Louise and her interview with her step-brother the night he died. The girl was in trouble enough as it was.

CHAPTER XVII.

A Hint of Scandal.

In giving the gist of what happened at the inquest, I have only one excuse—to recall to the reader the events of the night of Arnold Armstrong's murder. Many things had occurred which were not brought out at the inquest and some things were told there that were new to me. Altogether, it was a gloomy affair, and the six men in the corner, who constituted the coroner's jury, were evidently the merest puppets in the hands of that all-powerful gentleman, the coroner.

Gertrude and I sat well back, with our veils down. There were a number of people I knew: Barbara Fitzhugh, in extravagant mourning—she always went into black on the slightest provocation, because it was becoming—and Mr. Jarvis, the man who had come over from the Greenwood club the night of the murder. Mr. Harton was there, too, looking impatient as the inquest dragged, but alive to every particle of evidence. From a corner Mr. Jamieson was watching the proceedings intently.

Dr. Stewart was called first. His evidence was told briefly, and amounted to this: On the Sunday morning previous, at a quarter before five, he had been called to the telephone. The message was from a Mr. Jarvis, who asked him to come at once to Sunnyside.

side, as there had been an accident there, and Mr. Arnold Armstrong had been shot. He dressed hastily, gathered up some instruments, and drove to Sunnyside.

He was met by Mr. Jarvis, who took him at once to the east wing. There, just as he had fallen, was the body of Arnold Armstrong. There was no need of the instruments; the man was dead. In answer to the coroner's question—no, the body had not been moved, save to turn it over. It lay at the foot of the circular staircase. Yes, he believed death had been instantaneous. The body was still somewhat warm and rigor mortis had not set in. It occurred late in cases of sudden death. No, he believed the probability of suicide might be eliminated; the wounds could have been self-inflicted, but with difficulty, and there had been no weapon found.

The doctor's examination was over, but he hesitated and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Coroner," he said, "at the risk of taking up valuable time, I would like to speak of an incident that may or may not throw some light on this matter."

The audience was alert at once. "Kindly proceed, doctor," the coroner said. "My home is in Englewood, two miles from Casanova," the doctor began. "In the absence of Dr. Walker, a number of Casanova people have been consulting me. A month ago—five weeks, to be exact—a woman whom I had never seen came to my office. She was in deep mourning and kept her veil down, and she brought for examination a child, a boy of six. The little fellow was ill; it looked like typhoid, and the mother was frantic. She wanted a permit to admit the youngster to the Children's hospital in town here, where I am a member of the staff, and I gave her one. The incident would have escaped me, but for a curious thing. Two days before Mr. Armstrong was shot, I was sent for to go to the Country Club; some one had been struck with a golf ball that had gone wild. It was late when I left—I was on foot, and about a mile from the club, on the Clayburg road. I met two people. They were disputing violently, and I had no difficulty in recognizing Mr. Armstrong. The woman, beyond doubt, was the one who had consulted me about the child."

At this hint of scandal, Mrs. Ogden Fitzhugh sat up very straight. Jamieson was looking slightly skeptical, and the coroner made a note.

"The Children's hospital, you say, doctor?" he asked.

"Yes. But the child, who was entered as Lucien Wallace, was taken away by his mother two weeks ago. I have tried to trace them and failed."

All at once I remembered the telegram sent to Louise by some one signed P. L. W.—presumably Dr. Walker. Could the veiled woman be the Nina Carrington of the message? But it was only idle speculation. I had no way of finding out, and the inquest was proceeding.

The report of the coroner's physician came next. The post-mortem examination showed that the bullet had entered the chest in the fourth left intercostal space and had taken an oblique course downward and backward, piercing both the heart and lungs. The left lung was collapsed, and the exit point of the ball had been found in the muscles of the back to the left of the spinal column. It was improbable that such a wound had been self-inflicted, and its oblique downward course pointed to the fact that the shot had been fired from above. In other words, as the murdered man had been found dead at the foot of a staircase, it was probable that the shot had been fired by



some one higher up on the stairs. There were no marks of powder. The bullet, a .38 caliber, had been found in the dead man's clothing, and was shown to the jury.

Mr. Jarvis was called next, but his testimony amounted to little. He had been summoned by telephone to Sunnyside, had come over at once with the steward and Mr. Winthrop, at present out of town. They had been admitted by the housekeeper, and had found the body lying at the foot of the staircase. He had made a search for a weapon, but there was none around. The outer entry door in the east wing had been unfastened and was open about an inch.

I had been growing more and more nervous. When the coroner called Mr. John Bailey, the room was filled with suppressed excitement. Mr. Jamieson went forward and spoke a few words to the coroner, who nodded. Then Halsey was called.

"Mr. Innes," the coroner said, "will you tell under what circumstances you saw Mr. Arnold Armstrong the night he died?"

"I saw him first at the Country Club," Halsey said quietly. He was rather pale, but very composed. "I stopped there with my automobile for gasoline. Mr. Armstrong had been playing cards. When I saw him there he was coming out of the cardroom talking to Mr. John Bailey."

"The nature of the discussion—was it amicable?"

Halsey hesitated. "They were having a dispute," he said. "I asked Mr. Bailey to leave the club with me and come to Sunnyside over Sunday."

"Isn't it a fact, Mr. Innes, that you took Mr. Bailey away from the clubhouse because you were afraid there would be blows?"

"The situation was unpleasant," Halsey said evasively.

"At that time had you any suspicion that the Traders' bank had been wrecked?"

"No."

"What occurred next?"

"Mr. Bailey and I talked in the billiard room until 2:30."

"And Mr. Arnold Armstrong came there, while you were talking?"

"Yes. He came about half-past two. He rapped at the east door, and I admitted him."

The silence in the room was intense. Mr. Jamieson's eyes never left Halsey's face.

"Will you tell us the nature of his errand?"

"He brought a telegram that had come to the club for Mr. Bailey."

"He was sober?"

"Perfectly, at that time. Not earlier."

"Was not his apparent friendliness a change from his former attitude?"

"Yes. I did not understand it."

"How long did he stay?"

"About five minutes. Then he left by the east entrance."

"What occurred then?"

"We talked for a few minutes, discussing a plan Mr. Bailey had in mind. Then I went to the stables, where I kept my car, and got it out."

"Leaving Mr. Bailey alone in the billiard room?"

"My sister was there."

Mrs. Ogden Fitzhugh had the courage to turn and eye Gertrude through her location.

"And then?"

"I took the car along the lower road, not to disturb the household. Mr. Bailey came down across the lawn, through the hedge, and got into the car on the road."

"Then you know nothing of Mr. Armstrong's movements after he left the house?"

"Nothing. I read of his death Monday evening for the first time."

"Mr. Bailey did not see him on his way across the lawn?"

"I think not. If he had seen him he would have spoken of it."

"Thank you. That is all. Miss Gertrude Innes."

Gertrude's replies were fully as concise as Halsey's. Mrs. Fitzhugh subjected her to a close inspection, commencing with her hat and ending with her shoes. I flatter myself she found nothing wrong with either her gown or her manner, but poor Gertrude's testimony was the reverse of comforting. She had been summoned, she said, by her brother, after Mr. Armstrong had gone. She had waited in the billiard room with Mr. Bailey until the automobile had been ready. Then she had locked the door at the foot of the staircase, and, taking a lamp, had accompanied Mr. Bailey to the main entrance of the house, and had watched him cross the lawn. Instead of going at once to her room, she had gone back to the billiard room for something which had been left there. The cardroom and billiard room were in darkness. She had groped around, found the article she was looking for, and was on the point of returning to her room, when she had heard some one fumbling at the lock at the east outer door. She had thought it was probably her brother, and had been about to go to the door, when she heard it open. Almost immediately there was a shot, and she had run panic-stricken through the drawing room and had roused the house.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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MEET IN CONGRESS AT ROME

International Gathering of Foes of Tuberculosis to Be Held Late in September.

Official announcement of the Seventh International Congress on Tuberculosis, which will include representatives from every civilized country in the world, has been made by the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis. The congress will be held in Rome from September 24 to 30, 1931, and will be similar in many respects to that held in Washington in the fall of 1926. The congress, which meets every three years, will be under the direct patronage of the king and queen of Italy.

An American committee of 100 will be appointed as the official representatives of the United States. Meanwhile the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis is acting in that capacity and its office in New York will be the headquarters for the United States delegation. The secretary general of the congress is Prof. Vittorio Ascoli of Rome.

As a direct result of the stimulus of the last international congress held in this country, the American committee will be able to report that the number of tuberculosis agencies in this country have been tripled in the three years. More than twice as much money is being spent in the fight against tuberculosis by private societies and institutions, and the appropriations of federal, state, municipal and county have increased nearly fourfold. It is estimated that nearly \$15,000,000 will be spent in anti-tuberculosis work in 1931.

SLOW.



"What, hasn't George proposed yet?"

"No, what can you expect of a man who won't speed his automobile over fifteen miles an hour?"

Foiled.

He was very bashful and she tried to make it easy for him. They were driving along the seashore and she became silent for a time. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, I feel blue," she replied. "No body loves me and my hands are cold."

"You should not say that," was his word of consolation. "For God loves you, and your mother loves you, and you can sit on my hands."—Success Magazine

Perfectly Harmless.

A little girl of three years, whose father had bought her some firecrackers and skyrockets for the Fourth of July, wanted to know what they were for. On being told their purpose, she anxiously inquired if they would hurt anybody. When told they would not, she seemed relieved, and that night, when saying her prayers, she added: "An' Dad, don't 'oo be 'fraid of zom poppin' fings when zey make a noise tomorrow, 'cause zey won't hurt 'oo."

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WISE WILLIE.



The Nurse—The doctor brought the baby yesterday morning.

Willie (aged 6)—Better not forget where the doctor lives.

The Nurse—Why?

Willie—"Cause if the baby needs a hand or a leg, you'll have to get new parts for him, won't you?"

A Handicapped Official.

"You let some of the swiftest auto scorches get by without a word?"

"I know it," replied the village constable. "My glasses don't suit my eyes like they used to, and I can't do anything with an auto that ain't goin' slow enough for me to read the number."

The Modern Polonius.

"Now, my boy, don't expect to work wonders in this world."

"All right, dad."

"You can get quicker returns by working suckers."

It is the unhappy man who commonly sits down and thinks, the happy man gets up and does something.—G. S. Street.

A girl who sits and waits for a man to propose must feel a good deal like a cat that is watching a rathole.

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